

Western Balkans Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding

Pristina, 26 November 2025

MEETING REPORT

Executive Summary

CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, together with the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), organized a **Western Balkans Sub-Regional CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding** in Pristina on 26 November 2025. The Dialogue brought together UN and civil society actors from across the region to discuss ways to further strengthen the role of CSOs in building peace more effectively through a whole-of-system approach.

Established in 2023 by the United Nations (DPPA/PBSO), the **CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding** is an initiative that seeks to provide more systematic entry points for civil society to engage with the UN and Member States on peacebuilding issues¹. Two annual global Dialogues have been convened to date at the UN Headquarters in New York (2023 and 2024), bringing together civil society representatives from around the world. Throughout the Dialogues, participants have consistently emphasized the importance of convening Regional Dialogues feeding into the global discussions, to help enhance localization and establish systematic feedback loops.

Discussions emphasized the need for **integrated, whole-of-system approaches** to address interconnected challenges including disinformation, ethno-political radicalization, and shrinking civic space. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas were recognized as essential cross-cutting frameworks, with participants stressing the importance of youth engagement, media literacy education, and regional cooperation mechanisms.

Participants highlighted both the **unique peacebuilding challenges and opportunities** of the Western Balkans region, where the legacy of past conflicts continues to shape contemporary dynamics. The EU integration process was recognized as a central framework for regional peacebuilding, while participants noted that civil society increasingly carries the burden of advancing reconciliation and social cohesion.

Participants called on the UN to strengthen its role as a **connector between civil society and institutions**, to advocate more vocally for civic space protections, and to support flexible, sustainable funding models.

The insights collected during this Sub-Regional Dialogue **fed into the global CSO-UN Dialogue**.

¹ For more information on the CSO UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding, kindly access [this link](#).



I. The Western Balkan Peacebuilding Landscape

A recurring theme was the **tension between government-centric and locally owned approaches to peacebuilding**. From a civil society perspective, state actors and institutions increasingly appear to be working at cross-purposes with civil society. The question was raised: does civil society have its own architecture that can serve as a cornerstone of peacebuilding? The challenge of cooperating with institutions while maintaining independence and watchdog functions remains.

Shrinking civic space emerged as a critical concern across the region, with many participants reporting increasing government crack down on civil society over the past two years. The funding crisis compounds this challenge, as donor priorities shift. The ‘contractualization of peacebuilding’, and emergence of government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) threatens the nature of civil society value driven work. Overhead cost restrictions and short project timeframes undermine sustainability and impact.

Ethno-political radicalization remains deeply entrenched, with unresolved historical grievances and competing truths providing fertile ground for political exploitation. Intergroup contacts remain rare and largely limited to donor-funded initiatives. In some Western Balkans contexts, **civil society provides the only platforms for cross-border dialogue** and offers direct support that governmental institutions cannot or will not provide. Festivals and cultural exchanges, such as the Mirdita-Dobardan initiative (banned in Serbia in 2024), demonstrate both the potential and political resistance to inter-ethnic engagement. Participants emphasized the need for deliberate processes bringing diverse groups into shared dialogue spaces, depoliticization of community dialogue, and ethnicity-blind services and infrastructure.

Participants emphasized that **peace is built every day through sustained partnerships** and that trust can evaporate quickly when divisions are allowed to settle. The Western Balkans region faces distinct challenges derived from the legacy of past conflicts, where competing narratives and unresolved grievances continue to shape political and social dynamics. The terminology of peacebuilding itself poses challenges, as terms like “transitional justice” carry negative connotations in some contexts, and “peacebuilding” can prompt questions about whether there is still a war. Many organizations frame their work around “trustbuilding” instead.

The **EU integration process was identified as central to peacebuilding** in the region, serving as both a normative framework and a driver of reform as a common strategic goal of all countries in the region and thus, a possible starting point to create regional strategies that lead to initiatives at national level. Albania's Growth Plan was cited as a positive example of how EU accession can help protect civic space: notably by making independent civil society monitoring of reforms obligatory. The EU’s continued role as a normative actor remains essential, though participants stressed the need for better coordination between EU frameworks and UN mechanisms.

II. Cross-cutting challenges and entry points for integrated action

Participants identified a fundamental challenge of siloed institutions to address interconnected problems. Civil society work is inherently suited to integrate action because it starts from the bottom-up, yet institutions often lack the flexibility to respond to problems that span traditional sectoral boundaries. The current moment of **interconnected crises was framed as an opportunity for integrated action.**

Disinformation was identified as one of the primary vehicles undermining peace, human rights, and social cohesion in the region. Media plays a major role in amplifying divisive political messaging. Participants highlighted the challenge of ‘factual illiteracy’, declining trust in institutions and disinformation fatigue, particularly among youth, with significant gaps between the capacity to identify disinformation and knowing how to address it. Promising approaches include **media literacy and critical thinking programs embedded in education systems**, building teacher capacities across municipalities. A key lesson is that **platforms created by youth for youth** are most effective.

The **Women, Peace and Security agenda** has generated valuable lessons in the region, with governments partnering with civil society in designing and implementing National Action Plans. However, participants noted a concerning trajectory: after initial structures were built collaboratively, civil society has been increasingly excluded. Participants called for regional approaches to address **the current backlash against gender equality**. Digital violence was highlighted as an emerging priority. The importance of treating WPS as an overall stability challenge was emphasized. Cultural heritage initiatives have proven effective entry points for social cohesion, creating safe spaces and promoting cross-community engagement.

The **Youth, Peace and Security agenda** remains underutilized in the Western Balkans. However, though regional bodies such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office are working to increase its visibility and practical application. Participants stressed the need to **meet youth where they are**, geographically and thematically, and to ensure co-creation of programs from the outset. Key elements for advancing the agenda include peer-to-peer education on human rights, cross-regional cooperation to develop a YPS manual for teachers, and contextualized peace education embedded in school curricula. Achieving meaningful youth participation will require **trust and confidence building**, and sustained political buy-in. While youth in the region show significant political disengagement, investment in student councils is already demonstrating results, showing young people that they can influence change through institutional engagement.

III. Strengthening CSO-UN Partnership

Participants stressed the need for **the UN and civil society to think outside the project box** including different forms of engagement (core support, legal support, protection mechanisms...), and initiatives framed as contributions to SDGs with more flexibility.

Participants stressed that **civil society should not be treated as a guest in the UN Peacebuilding Architecture, but as a pillar of it**, expressing disappointment with the recent Review process leaning toward government-centric approaches. Meaningful local ownership requires working directly with communities and civil society. The sovereign nationalist-centric approach visible in regional politics cannot be allowed to shape UN engagements in the region.

Participants also identified concrete mechanisms that international actors could put in place. These include a **UN-supported regional mechanism to safeguard CSOs**, mapping and monitoring civic space across the region and considering putting in place institutional safeguards such as Ombudsman institutions. They also called for **linking financial support to civic space guarantees**, ensuring a basic level of funding for civil society survival. Finally, participants proposed **a regional hub to react to crises as they emerge**, noting that responses are always stronger when the UN is involved.

The region provides the potential to ensure that years of UN investment are not jeopardized. Participants urged the UN not to stay in the corner, noting that **communities still trust the UN** and that the UN must be a leader in supporting negotiation and dialogue in the Western Balkans. The UN's role in filling protection gaps and connecting civil society to institutions was emphasized.

IV. Conclusion

At the centre of these regional lessons lies the critical importance of **trust-building across divided communities** where competing historical narratives remain politically salient. The region demonstrates both the potential and the fragility of peacebuilding, how decades of progress can be undermined, and how civil society often provides the only continuity when official channels break down or close.

The region offers lessons about **operating where the UN is one actor among many**, requiring coordination with the EU, NATO, OSCE, and regional bodies. Civil society's bridging role is essential, connecting international frameworks to local realities, providing independent monitoring that international actors can build into their requirements, and maintaining dialogue channels that official processes cannot sustain. The Western Balkans Sub-Regional Dialogue showed the importance of continuing the UN's engagement with this region, both to support civil society facing mounting pressures and draw on the region's hard-won experience in building peace amid political resistance.

The Western Balkans shares both commonalities and differences with other regions when it comes to peacebuilding. Actors in the region navigate a unique landscape where **EU integration serves as a central peacebuilding framework**, yet political leaders are often seen to work at cross-purposes with reconciliation efforts. The ways in which civil society has adapted to these conditions hold important insights for the global CSO-UN Dialogue on Peacebuilding.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Support youth-led platforms for countering disinformation**, recognizing that content created by youth for youth proves more effective than top-down messaging.
- **Ensure youth are involved as co-designers from the outset** of all initiatives that expect their participation in implementation, with particular attention to understanding youth priorities.
- **Embed media literacy and critical thinking programs systematically in education systems** across the region, with UN support for curriculum harmonization, and teacher capacity building.
- **Establish regional CSO cooperation mechanisms and crisis response hubs** to enable rapid mobilization, cross-border knowledge sharing, and coordinated responses to emerging challenges, with UN facilitation and support.
- **The UN should strengthen its role as a connector between civil society and institutions**, advocating for civic space protections and ensuring that civil society voices are reflected in policy and decision-making processes, particularly in contexts where governments are hostile to independent civil society.
- **Increase UN Special Rapporteur visits and Geneva-level coordination** on Western Balkans issues, using international human rights mechanisms to mobilize action on legislation, implementation, and protection of civic space.
- **Publicly support human rights defenders and activists under pressure**, providing not only private meetings but visible solidarity, legal support, and protection mechanisms.
- **Promote intergroup contact as systematic policy**, supporting depoliticized community dialogue spaces and ethnicity-blind service delivery that builds trust across divides.
- **Advocate for institutional safeguards** for civic space and peacebuilding across the region, including strengthened Ombudsman institutions.
- **Strengthen EU-UN coordination**, ensuring that EU accession systematically incorporate independent civil society oversight requirements.
- **Develop long-term, flexible funding models** that prioritize core institutional support over short-term project funding.